

Dragonshards The Gnomes of Zilargo, Part 2

By Keith Baker



"Five words can defeat a thousand swords."

-- Zil proverb

National Character

Some have compared the Zil gnomes to social rodents. The gnomes are happiest in groups. They are energetic and highly industrious, and they prefer to avoid conflict with larger creatures. But like rats, gnomes are survivors. Stealth, deception, and pure tenacity are the tools of the gnome -- and when cornered, a gnome can be a surprisingly dangerous foe.

The streets of Zilargo are bright and cheerful. The gnomes are helpful, attentive, and usually willing to lend an ear to the troubles of a traveler and a hand to those in need. Sometimes this is just what it seems. But the Zil gnomes are schooled in deception from childhood, and, all too often, their good cheer and friendly demeanor is an illusion. The Zil character has a paranoid streak, and the helpful nature of the Zil gnomes is rarely altruistic. While the gnomes are curious by nature, that curiosity is often fueled by the desire to gain leverage over every possible enemy. If you tell a gnome your problems, he may or may not help you. If he does, you owe him a favor. If he doesn't, he has learned about your weaknesses -- and in the eyes of the Zil, all information has value.

It would be an exaggeration to say that every Zil gnome is a ruthless schemer. While cunning and cautious, the Zil are people like any other. While some are cold-blooded opportunists, others do enjoy helping others. But even a goodhearted gnome may rely on manipulation and deception to accomplish his goals.

While energetic and cheerful, the gnomes are not childish or foolish. They are masterful merchants and negotiators, and they are adept at setting others at ease and weaving words into a pleasing tapestry. The people of Zilargo see language as an art, so Zil gnomes are typically well-spoken and sophisticated. Even a gnome farmer or miner has training in conversation and debate. The typical gnome is not a clown or a source of comic relief -- unless it suits her purposes to have others see her that way.

Games of Wit and Wisdom

The Zil gnomes love games of strategy, but their favorite pastime is intrigue. The seemingly dull farmer could be involved in a dozen plots. Often these plots are tied to a local community: feuds to shift the balance of power between families, attempts to influence local romances, or economic schemes. Two gnomes may engage in a shadow war to acquire a certain rare book, not because either truly cares about the book, but as a game -- a test of cunning and wit. But beyond these innocent pastimes, the waiter at the bar could be working for the Trust, the Aurum, the Korranberg Chronicle, or any number of other cabals with international goals.

Beyond his personal schemes, every Zil gnome has a bond to his family and his clan, and each has its own economic and political goals. Business contracts, mining rights, government positions, influence within a trade

guild -- in Zilargo, all of these things are determined by cunning and manipulation. As noted in Part One, the Trust intervenes only if the security of the land is threatened or if actual laws are broken. If the Lorridans and the Lyrrimans are feuding to see who will get the rights to Blackhowl Mine, the Trust doesn't care -- as long as no one is killed and the resources of the mine ultimately benefit gnomes. If the Lorridans started murdering the Lyrrimans, or the Lyrrimans made arrangements to sell the mine to House Cannith . . . that's when the Trust may get involved.

Family loyalty is immensely important in Zilargo. In a society that thrives on deception, the gnomes find it extremely important to have someone they can trust without reservation, and for the Zil this is the bond of blood. While families may fight one another for position within a clan, betrayal of a direct family member is almost unheard of and would call for bitter and vicious vengeance. Likewise, favors and debts are a serious matter in the Land of the Wise. A web of secrets, favors, and debts binds this nation together, and a gnome may be called on at any time to repay a personal favor or a debt owed by her family. Failure to comply with a reasonable request threatens the entire system and can have grave consequences. Of course, this is a two-way street; a gnome PC is expected to repay her debts, but she can also call in favors from the people she helps during her adventures.

The Role of the Bard

The Zil use the standard gnome statistics presented in the *Player's Handbook*. Their unusual culture is reflected by the fact that many gnomes who would be commoners in other nations instead possess a single level of expert, with training in Sense Motive, Bluff, Diplomacy, and a number of languages in addition to the Craft or Profession skills they use to earn a living.

A surprising number of gnomes rise above the level of expert to become bards. While gnomish entertainers are celebrated across Khorvaire, not all bards are entertainers, and many Zil bards do not have any ranks of Perform. But even without the powers of bardic music, the class reflects many things common to Zil culture. The skill selection is highly appropriate for the Zil, who focus on social, knowledge, and language skills. Bardic knowledge represents the gnomish fascination with knowledge in all forms. And the magic of the bard is an extension of the innate racial gifts of the gnome -- magic that lies latent in the blood of the race. Thus Zil chroniclers, politicians, mediators, and barristers are just as likely to have bard levels as actual entertainers.

When it comes to entertainment, the Zil gnomes love story and song above mere music, and skilled performers illustrate their tales with phantasmal forces. Musically, small hand drums and woodwinds are the most common instruments. But the trademark of the Zil master musician is the *Thurimbar rod* -- a wondrous item that enhances a gnome's innate talent for *ghost sound*, allowing him to produce any sound he can imagine. Due to the high price of the *Thurimbar rod* (2,800 gp), these instruments are usually seen only in the hands of the finest bards or as treasured heirlooms.

Zil Style and Customs

Zil spellweavers bind illusion into cloth, and the finest glamerweave comes from this land. Some tailors specialize in hypnotic abstract patterns while others weave clear images into their outfits: an evening gown might hold a breathtaking rendition of a sunset over the Seawall Mountains. Magical or no, most Zil gnomes prefer bright colors and loose, flowing designs. Hats are also popular, and a typical Zil street has gnomes wearing a plethora of different styles of headgear. Jewelry bearing both precious and semiprecious stones accentuates clothing; a gnome who cannot afford gold and gemstones sees no shame in wearing finely crafted ornaments of copper and glass.

Zil architecture is as beautiful as the clothing of the gnomes. Multiple types of wood and stone blend together to form pleasing patterns. Even the smallest communities are lit with *continual flame*, and, in large cities and metropolises, bound elementals provide heat, light, and other amenities. The gnomes go to great lengths to make their homes accessible to foreigners; in cities and towns every building have doors and furniture sized for Medium creatures as well as Small ones, and even in the villages at least one building is designed to accommodate Medium visitors. Zil houses are often filled with trappings from foreign lands -- Aereni woodwork, Sarlonan tapestries, and exotic plants from Xen'drik or Q'barra. Traditionally a guest brings a small gift to repay a host for his hospitality, and this often becomes a form of competition. A wealthy gnome might send a party of adventurers to Xen'drik to recover a piece of art from the Age of Giants, purely because she wants to present it at a party.

Gnomes use *prestidigitation* to maintain their personal appearance and to keep property clean; as a result, the streets are unnaturally bright, colors remain remarkably vivid, and the gnomes themselves have impeccable hygiene. Even in filthy foreign cities, a gnome takes pains to maintain her appearance, and a dirty gnome probably isn't from Zilargo. Likewise, ragged adventurers may be barred from certain Zil establishments and events unless they are properly groomed and attired. Gnomes also have a keen sense of smell, and scent plays a significant role in Zil fashion; men and women alike make use of perfumes and oils, many so subtle that humans can't even smell them. A social "language of scent" allows a gnome to indicate her current status -- seeking companionship, conversation, solitude, help, and so on. A gnome can recognize the intent of a scent by making a DC 10 Wisdom check and a DC 15 Knowledge (local) check. Other creatures with enhanced senses -- such as a shifter with the Wildhunt ability -- can identify these scents, but unless raised among gnomes they cannot deduce the social meaning of the smell.

The gnomish sense of smell and talent for *prestidigitation* are also reflected in Zil cuisine. The Zil gnomes make use of a wide variety of subtle spices, including certain flavors that can be produced only through *prestidigitation*. One of the most common beverages in the land is maleko, which is chilled water infused with faint traces of flavor; visitors are often baffled by the gnome who passes up a tankard of ale to savor a glass of water.

Artifice, Alchemy, and the Arcane

Magic runs through the blood of the gnomes -- a faint gift of illusion that some attribute to the distant touch of Thelanis. Many gnomes develop this talent without formal training. Levels of bard or sorcerer reflect this, and the gnomes typically focus their studying on enchantment, illusion, and conjuration spells. The insatiable curiosity of the gnomes has led to the pursuit of artifice and arcane magic. Zil artificers are justly famed, but House Cannith possesses the most gifted artificers in Khorvaire, and Arcanix is still the greatest seat of wizardry. But Zil gnomes are unsurpassed in two fields: alchemy and elemental binding. Some say that the Zil wrested the secrets of elemental binding from the ruins of Xen'drik, and they jealously guard this secret. No rule in the *Eberron Campaign Setting* book stops a PC of any race from taking the Bind Elemental feat. However, a DM may require a PC to acquire this feat in Zilargo or Xen'drik. In addition, the Zil gnomes consider this knowledge to be a national resource. An adventurer producing an occasional suit of elemental-bound armor is left alone, but if a PC starts producing airships and thus threatening the Zil monopoly on the art, he may be targeted by agents of the Trust.

Questions to Ask

When you play a Zil gnome PC or NPC, consider the following:

- What is your relationship with your family?
- Are you involved in any long-term intrigues? Who are your enemies and rivals?

- What form does your curiosity take? Are you trying to gain influence? Arcane knowledge? Or do you simply want to visit new lands and meet interesting people?
 - Conceal your feelings from all but your closest friends. Feign whatever emotions suit the needs of the moment -- but only your most trusted allies should ever see your true face.
 - A Zil gnome almost always seeks to avoid direct physical combat. Is there a way to resolve a conflict without resorting to violence? If not, how can you maximize your advantages against the enemy? To the Zilfolk, a fair fight is a fool's game.
 - Language is an art. Never use one word when you could use two, provided those two are clever and witty.
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About the Author

Keith Baker has been an avid fan of **Dungeons & Dragons** since grade school. His life took a dramatic turn in 2002 when he submitted the world of **Eberron** to the Wizards of the Coast Fantasy Setting Search. In addition to developing the **Eberron** Campaign Setting and *Shadows of the Last War*, he has worked for Atlas Games, Goodman Games, and Green Ronin.

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